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BUILDING ON THE INDIGENOUS

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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULAR PARTICIPATION IN THE RECOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESS IN AFRICA

12-16 February 1990
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We cannot significantly advance the development of Africa unless we take African societies seriously as they are, not as they ought to be or even as they might be; that sustainable development is never going to occur unless we build on the indigenous. Now, what is the indigenous and how might we build on it?

The indigenous is not the traditional, there is no fossilized existence of the African past available for us to fall back on; only new totalities however hybrid which change with each passing day. The indigenous refers to whatever the people consider important in their lives, whatever they regard as an authentic expression of themselves. We build on the indigenous by making it determine the form and content of development strategy, by ensuring that developmental change accommodates itself to these things, be they values, interests, aspirations and/or institutions which are important in the life of the people. It is only when developmental change comes to terms with them that it can become sustainable. Thus sustainable technological development occurs only when the innovative technology is totally localized and assimilated into the life of the people, when the people see its relevance, accept it and even make it an expression of their creativity by refashioning it according to their changing circumstances.

Implications

This is all rather obvious. However basing development on the indigenous makes a great deal of difference, indeed it leads to a development paradigm radically different from the prevailing one. What difference does it make?

First, it will lead to a democratic and participative development simply by giving primacy to the interests, values and aspirations of the people at large. The prevailing paradigm of development in Africa suffers from relying too much on coercion and authoritarianism; this arises from conspiracy between African leaders who are using force to maintain power in the face of vanishing legitimacy and development agencies who see their development paradigm as scientific and objective and therefore calling for no doubt, no dissent and no negotiated consensus.

Political authoritarianism and coercion has cost Africa dearly for it has contributed in no small way to the failures of African development. To be specific, it has led to the dissociation of development from social needs. The social base of power and decision-making has been too narrow and decision-making has been dominated by interests which are too narrow and often in conflict with public good, hence the disassociation of development from social needs. Authoritarianism has demobilized the people by making it virtually impossible for their interests to register in public policy. African leaders are unable to mobilize the people's energy and support. They have succeeded only in compelling their conformity and in the course of doing this have forced millions of people into a silent strike against their policies. Coercion has brutalized African peoples to an extent that is highly detrimental to their sense of efficiency. As African leaders keep uselessly busy coercing everyone to accede to the numerous demands of their self-serving policies, e.g., changing their patterns of consumption and production, forcing them into "consolidated" villages - they have undermined the peoples traditional capacity of coping in their difficult environment.

Second, the notion of building on the indigenous will help to correct a situation in which development has become a process of traumatization and alienation. This situation arises from the fact that the prevailing development paradigm has pressed the distinction between developed and underdeveloped societies into a dichotomy between good and bad. The underdeveloped societies of Africa are treated as though they have neither validity nor integrity and may be violated at will. Their validity lies in repudiating what they are in order to be reconstituted into something new and better. The task of development is no longer how a people might move forward on its own terms given all that it is, but how it might be transformed by other people in their own image of what they consider it ought to be. From this perspective, development becomes an exercise in self-alienation and humiliation.

The psychological injuries arising from this are easy to see. The confidence of African leaders have been undermined. They no longer act, they merely react, accepting submissively every development fad from the centre - export promotion, import substitution, structural adjustment, whatever - and abandoning them just as soon as the next fad comes along. We have been criticizing them for not bringing about development, but we must now consider whether development was ever really on their agenda, we must wonder whether they ever had the audacity to seek development which is as truly heroic undertaking. All we see are signs of diffidence and self-contempt: easy options thoughtlessly and cheerfully chosen, unshakable belief that other people will bring redemption. Then there are the bizarre manifestations of insecurity: an African Head of State tearfully calling De Gaulle father, trying to recreate the splendour of long-forgotten and better-forgotten French monarchs; African leaders forbidding the speaking of indigenous languages, the wearing of African traditional clothes in Parliament, etc. There is a problem of confidence, and development calls for consummate confidence and high seriousness, something which the prevailing paradigm does not encourage.

Third, the notion of building on the indigenous will help us to avoid assuming that the indigenous is never conducive to development and pressing capitalist rationality too far in African conditions. The prevailing paradigm is notoriously hostile to everything indigenous. For instance, it spurns the communal tradition of African people presumably because communalism retards social automation and the transition to a market society. It is conveniently forgotten that communalism is highly functional as a proxy social security system. Primary group loyality is disliked as a regressive form of consciousness impeding the development of efficient rational-bureaucratic structures. But we do not see that it is the basis of the ethnic associations that have contributed immensely to the development of rural Africa. The household economy elicits hostility because it is oriented to the law of subsistence rather then the law of value and to reproduction rather than production. And yet it is the quintessential expression of those things which we want the national economy to become. It provides a very model of self-reliance, internal balance and autocentric dynamics which we should be reproducing at the national level.

Fourth, the notion of building on the indigenous is the necessary condition for self-reliant development to which there is now no alternative. The evidence is in, dependent development has failed. Its failure is manifest in the deep and protracted crisis in Africa and the rapid collapse of the United Nations Programme of Action for African Economic Recovery and Development (UN-PAAERD) as well as Africa's Priority Programme for Economic Recovery (APPER). To all appearances, the failure is irreversible. This is because of certain changes in the world economy such as the increasing dematerialization of production. So it will have to be self-reliance, after all.

When the choice is reduced to self-reliance, when the people become the end and the means of development, their interests, values and aspirations necessararily determine the content, strategies and modalities of development. So much for the general implications of building on the indigenous.

Operational significance

It remains to show the operational significance of building on the indigenous; this cannot be done fully here, only sketchily, by way of illustration. To begin with, one important significance is that we have to de-emphasize those factors which are monopolizing our attention today: the debt crisis, commodity prices, the balance of trade, levels of development assistance and foreign investment, structural adjustment. To be sure it is desirable that the unfavourable turn of these factors be checked and reversed. However, it is a mistake to give them the highest priority for they are only symptoms of an underlying pathology. Not so long ago, these factors were not so unfavourable and yet Africa did not quite flourish. If they are improved today Africa is unlikely to advance very much and may conceivably slide back again.

What needs to be done is to place emphasis where it should have been all along, namely the regeneration of the grass-roots where there is still some vitality, before the rot gets too deep. To regenerate the grass-roots, we have to localize development. Without prejudice to the need for some bigger national projects, the emphasis has to be placed on smaller projects developed and executed in an entirely participatory manner and relying mainly on local resources. It is only when development is localized and democratically controlled that it can be consummated - by becoming the right of each and the responsibility of all. It is only then that is ceases to be alienating, acknowledges our moral autonomy and truly enriches our humanity. This is easier said than done. There are immense obstacles to the operationalization of the notion of building on the indigenous. They are not economic but rather political. The major problem is political resistance. It comes from African leaders determined to maintain their control and from ambitious and cynical nations attending to their self-aggrandizement under cover of developing Africa. The overcoming of this resistance will be a decisive break-through and it must be regarded as a major item on the development agenda.

It remains to indicate what all this means for development agencies. For these agencies, the notion of building on the indigenous will entail drastic and painful adjustments. They will have to learn to suspend belief in the superiority of their knowledge and their values. They will have to think in terms of much smaller projects developed and implemented democratically and this will be maddeningly messy. They will have to curb their penchant for instant gratification which lures them to invest in the so-called productive sectors as opposed to the social sectors. They will have to make it clear that they are assisting peoples, not States or governments.

These adjustments will throw up significant contradictions which they will hopefully confront without being squeamish knowing fully well that they must get immersed in political struggles which will create problems for them at home and abroad. In getting involved with the development of Africa, they are interfering with vital social processes in any case, they might as well interfere usefully.